

CREATING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK: FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

A Sermon By
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In the midst of terror and disaster, people can bring to each other the most profound gifts of light and laughter, creation and camaraderie. In the story Curtiss told about KiteGang (www.kitegang.org), we have an example of how a simple act of creativity can become an essential act of healing, both for the individuals involved in making kites and flying them, and for the community who finds renewed joy in working together for a goal beyond and above the horrors of life in a refugee camp or an urban slum.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen a cyclone take the lives of maybe a hundred thousand in Burma/Myanmar, and an earthquake bury tens of thousands in Mianmang, China. These disasters remind us over and over how fragile our lives really are in the face of the earth's natural forces, forces that are an essential or unavoidable aspect of a planet in this phase of existence. Our inabilities or failures to build communities which can withstand such forces with little loss of life are frustrating and horrifying.

The human forces of destruction can crush communities with the same results as cyclones and earthquakes. These, though, we ought to be able to prevent. So some of us in the world work tirelessly for peace, to bring aid to others as well as hope. And many of us provide monetary support, in the least, to those who put their own lives on the line to help.

The idea, though, that health and safety require more than food in the belly and shelter in the camps is an amazing one. The revelation is that a focus on creativity can lead people beyond their fears, can lead them into working together, thinking, being, seeing, touching, laughing their way into finding beauty around them once again. And hope.

I will never forget the story Annaliese Schaffer told me one day in her apartment. She was in her nineties, and the memories of her experience in Auschwitz were coming back to haunt her more and more. She knew Anne Frank while there. And Annaliese's four-year old daughter hadn't survived. Still, Annaliese told me that in spite of the horrors of life there, and the terrors, she would go outside in the early morning to the edge of the fence that surrounded the camp, and she would revel in the sunlight that fell upon her face, and find peace.

"Was that bad?" she asked me, after confessing her ability to rise above her circumstances. That she would have carried such doubt for so many years left me breathless! In the midst of disaster, it is our duty to reach for hope, to maintain faith, and to practice love over and over. It is the appreciation of and creation of beauty, whether a sunrise or kites flying, that brings peace within and strength to continue to live amongst the worst of life's curses. It is what breathes blessings upon what remains of the good and right.

One of my favorite Bible quotes is 1 Corinthians 13:13: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” In spite of the fact that this was written in a letter to the Corinthians by the apostle Paul, the great misogynist who in one generation undid everything Jesus taught regarding the place of women in spiritual matters, these words speak to me of the deepest of human spiritual truths. I live my life periodically pondering and applying this one phrase to all I experience.

Religious truths jump out at us. Unitarians and Universalists understood this, and founded our faith on a realization that God created us with the ability to reason, and reason is what we must use in sifting through the histories, stories and teachings that make up the Bible. It is my responsibility to take whatever I come across of such teachings and pass them through the fire of my own experience and the rest of what I have encountered of the wisdom of the world, and decide what to keep and what to discard. Like the wheat and the chaff.

So, in spite of Paul saying, two chapters earlier, that the head of woman is her husband and that she ought to have a veil on her head, he also said these beautiful words about love: Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way ; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” (1 Corinthians 13:4 -8)

Love never ends. These three abide: faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love. We’re talking here about the highest of what humans can aspire to, what we call the divine, or God. We also can call it our highest selves, the best of human nature and community. What does faith, hope and love mean to us today?

Ralph Waldo Emerson pondered this question, as have many throughout the almost two thousand years of Christianity. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., who wrote this great biography entitled *Emerson: Mind on Fire*, said that Emerson described the religious impulse of humans as having both a “religious sentiment” and a “moral sentiment.” The “moral sentiment,” Richardson writes, “is the...fundamental perception that the world has an essential balance and wholeness.” (p. 289)

“The...fundamental perception that the world has an essential balance and wholeness.” I call that “faith.” When we Unitarian Universalists talk about faith, we are not necessarily talking about a faith in a particular god or set of beliefs, but more likely referring to this essential balance and wholeness. Richardson also calls it a “fundamental perception,” not a “belief,” because it is something we experience or feel.

This “moral sentiment” of perceiving an essential balance and wholeness in the world awakens the religious sentiment in human beings, according to Emerson. The “religious sentiment” is universal and is the feeling of veneration or reverence that arises from this perception of balance and wholeness, and this feeling is the foundation of all religion.

The transformational point that Emerson made, a point which went against what Christianity was teaching in his day, was that that feeling is an intuition and could not be taught or given by another. As Richardson summarized it, “Divinity surrounds the living every day.” It is within us and around us.

Yellow morning sunlight shining on Annaliese, bringing peace and hope. Colorful kites flying over starving people who, for a brief moment, can laugh and play and start to be healed. We are surrounded by what is beautiful and good even in the midst of

disasters and nearly unimaginable horrors. What keeps us alive in the worst of circumstances is this perception of the divine within us and somewhere, somewhere, out there in the larger world.

Faith, hope and love abide. Abide is a good word. These three remain, are there within us no matter what, and no one and nothing can take them away. At times, we lose touch with them and experience despair, but the source of these three lies within us, and is nurtured by what is right and good in the world around us whenever we open our eyes to see and our ears to hear. It is a huge thing, a divine act, to open ourselves to the sunlight when our daughters and sons are being exterminated. It is an act of faith, hope and love to build kites and fly them in the face of our enemies.

Last fall the fires in Southern California swept down the canyon where Curtiss' uncle Glenn and aunt Joan lived. They had experienced evacuations enough times before so that this time they were ambivalent about how much to pack. Glenn took important things anyway, but Joan decided not to. She left her pictures, her keepsakes, mementos of her life, almost everything. And this time the house burned to the ground.

When I saw Joan in March at our family reunion, I asked her how she was coping with that loss, and she said that she actually felt the love of her family and friends sustaining her, like a blanket wrapped around her. It was a tangible feeling, like a lifeline, and it enabled her to get through, and continue to heal, from this loss. Joan is a person, I have noticed over the years, who maintains a deep connection with faith, hope and love within her, sharing them readily with others with the most amazing kindness, drawing strength from them which she also shares with the world around her. In this way, she creates beauty wherever she goes. She is beauty incarnate.

There are many things to be afraid of: illness, recession, war -mongering. Will we have enough money in these harder times is a good question, and yet, in the context of the larger world, we are still the richest in that larger world, relatively speaking. We can see our cups half empty if we choose, and live in fear, and proclaim doom. But it is just as true that those cups are half full, and there is so much goodness and beauty in our lives that it is a crime not to recognize them, cherish them, and share them with others in a divine proclamation of faith, hope and love.

Many people desire to believe that God or a god has a hand in our living. Yet, God is not a blame game. One needs to have a faith that transcends human desires (like prayers for this or that, please), or nature's realities (like cyclones, earthquakes, or fires), or human atrocities (like planes flown into buildings, concentration camps, atomic bombs, or wars).

We need a faith in the life that *is*. The universe is basically right and good because we exist within it, and it is our human existence that creates the deeper meanings of good and evil. Call it God or not, even better, let there be no name or image or letter as in the ancient Hebrew, and expressing god with "I am," as in the story of Moses' encounter with God as the burning bush in Exodus - "I am that I am." (Exodus 3:14)

These two words, "I am," take the nature of god into ourselves so that we become god in the world when we rise to our highest being, in concert with the greatest, best, healthiest ideals and values of humankind, of life itself. In this way, we become the sunlight for the darkest places, the joy that the world needs so desperately to feel, the faith, hope and love for all the earth.